

like a cross between birthing pains and dying pains. Mr. Pendir, a carpenter by trade, just like Zora's father, was fishing in Amherst Lake one time in a tiny dugout canoe that he had built himself, when he accidentally cornered a young gator. An older gator caught sight of this and started up that horrible hissing. Mr. Pendir, no fool, knew exactly what it meant. Next thing he knew, *three* grown gators were in the water and swimming his way. But he didn't panic—not the way I heard it told. He let the gators get close to his boat, then threw the bucketful of fish he'd caught right at them. It distracted them just long enough for him to jump in the water and swim like the dickens to shore. The three gators smashed his boat to pieces, but Mr. Pendir lived to tell the tale, without a scratch on his peanut-colored bald head.

If any other man in the town had survived the same experience, he would have crowed about it all over creation. Not Mr. Pendir. No one would have known about it at all if Joe Clarke hadn't seen him carving a new canoe and asked him what happened to the old one. Everyone knew Mr. Pendir to be quiet and honest, and no one doubted the story for a minute. Still, some folks ran to the lake anyway and found the splintered pieces of the dugout canoe washed up

on the shore. All of Eatonville looked at Mr. Pendir a little funny after that. So it didn't seem so far-fetched that Mr. Pendir could actually be what Zora said he was, half gator and half man.

"Well . . . *then* what happened?" Stella Brazzle snapped the question, angry at herself for being curious.

"What do you think? I jumped up and ran! But the whole way home, I could hear the creaking sound of a gator opening its jaws and clapping them shut."

Teddy blinked. "Did he follow you?" he asked, nervous, like it had just occurred to him that Mr. Pendir might be gaining on Zora and the rest of us, even now.

Zora didn't have a chance to respond. Our teacher, Mr. Calhoun, stepped out onto the stoop of the schoolhouse and rang the bell. The spell was broken. As we all ran inside, kids shouted things like, "Aw, fibber," "You crazy, Zora," and, "You ain't seen no such thing!"

"All right, don't believe me, then," Zora said. "But when all y'all coulda been playing kickball, you were standing around like boards listening to me. That alone is proof I'm telling the truth." And she beamed, as proud as if they had given her a medal for bravery.